

## American Profile

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EDITORIALS & COMMENT

## Our soldiers should be thanked for progress in Iraq

By Rob Simmons

**“W**e are now ready,” the Iraqi Army officer said, speaking with authority and confidence.

We were in northern Iraq, near the city of Mosul, and I was hearing something I had not heard before. Our briefer was Lt. Col. Amar, the commander of the 22nd Battalion of the Iraqi Army's 2nd Brigade, 2nd Division.

He had taken command of the unit a year earlier, was threatened with decapitation, and suffered serious casualties while fighting jointly with U.S. forces last year. Now his unit was staffed, equipped, and trained to take full responsibility for its area of operations in Mosul.

According to schedule, the 2nd Division would complete the transition of authority by August 2006. This is what Amar had been working for and it is what we want. It is a positive development.

As Iraqi security forces increasingly take to the field to secure their country, U.S. soldiers can step back and begin to come home. The challenge is to step back systematically while Iraq takes up the burden of its own defense, and to keep our soldiers as safe as possible in the interim.

From Jan. 8-13, I led a bipartisan congressional delegation to Iraq, Kuwait, and Germany on behalf of the House Armed Services Committee. Our purpose was threefold:

- To assess the progress of the Iraqi security forces to assume security responsibilities;
- To examine U.S. force protection programs;
- And to listen to U.S. troops about their issues.

### Iraqi security forces

On the first point, there is no question that progress is being made. Not only have Iraqi security forces assumed increasing responsibility to provide security for the three historic elections in 2005, but they are shouldering increased responsibility for areas of operation under their control.

This is according to plan and, as Sen. Joseph Lieberman has written, “the plan has not remained

stubbornly still but has changed over the years” to adjust to field requirements.

The “National Strategy for Victory in Iraq,” released in November 2005, states one of our objectives is to “develop the Iraqis’ capacity to secure their country while carrying out a campaign to defeat the terrorists and neutralize the insurgency.” We are making progress in meeting that objective.

In the summer of 2004 there were five Iraqi army battalions and no Iraqi special police battalions engaged in the fight to secure the country. Now there are 97 Iraqi army and 28 special police battalions. In the fall of 2004, there were 110,000 Iraqi security forces; now there are 214,000. Intelligence tips to the Iraqi security forces have grown from several hundred a month to almost 5,000 per month, which shows popular support for these forces over terrorists.

### U.S. force protection

Progress is also being made in American force protection. When I visited Iraq more than two years ago the high mobility multi-purpose wheeled vehicles our troops were using did not have the required up-armor upgrades. Today we are told virtually all of those vehicles and most trucks in theater have been up-armored. Those that have not been modified are used on bases.

In addition, some troops now drive the Stryker combat vehicle, which was unavailable two years ago. The Stryker is ideally suited for service in Iraq as it brings together the capacities for rapid deployment, survivability, and tactical mobility. The Stryker features an armor add-on kit that provides 360-degree protection from rocket-propelled grenades, and we are told the vehicles have survived multiple attacks with no casualties.

Substantial progress has been made in defeating improvised explosive devices using electronic jammers, remote vehicles, and large armored vehicles. Improvements have also been made in training U.S. forces in how to avoid IEDs, although more trainers will be requested in the coming months.

Several problem areas remain

and we were astounded to learn of the delays in upgrading body armor for U.S. forces. Granted, body armor is widely available, but certain improvements such as shoulder and under-arm protection, and some sizes of protective plates, are not supplied in sufficient quantity. This is unacceptable and the House Armed Services Committee will hold a hearing on this subject as soon as the House reconvenes this month.

### U.S. troop issues

While troop morale is often mixed in a combat zone, I found morale to be uniformly high among those we met. They feel they are doing something important, they see results and they want to finish the job. Many active-duty soldiers volunteer to return for a second tour because they believe their service is important.

On the issue of immediate withdrawal, there was unanimous opposition. One soldier said, “We cannot leave too quickly, or it would be a waste.” Another said, “We need to give these people a chance.” One Air National Guard pilot said he felt safer flying into Iraq today than two years ago. That’s progress.

One area of concern was operations tempo, the frequency of deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan. This is of concern to National Guard and Reserves because they are removed from civilian jobs and communities to serve overseas. Too-frequent deployment stresses families and results in deferred promotions in civilian jobs. These soldiers are understandably uneasy about how they will maintain their civilian jobs if they are called to duty periodically.

The National Guard and Reserve are doing an extraordinary job in Iraq. The recently returned 143rd Area Support Group from Connecticut was the first Guard unit charged with Embassy security, providing protection to the critically important “Green Zone” in Baghdad. Despite their honest and faithful service, we need to examine how we draw upon the time and talent of our Guard and Reserves so as not to wear them out.

### Transition to authority

As the Iraqi army and police

forces continue the “transition to authority” and assume more control of security, our soldiers can come home. This is happening. We spent more than two hours at the Multi-National Security Transition Command-Iraq learning about the training and deployment of Iraqi police who are critical to civilian security. While Americans train the Iraqi police trainers, they in turn recruit and train their own forces. This allows the Iraqi Ministry of Interior to take over responsibility for civil security from U.S. forces.

U.S. transition teams of military police personnel are located at every level of the Iraqi police organization to help. This advisory effort reduces our risk to our soldiers, while placing police at the front line of their civilian security in mosques, neighborhoods, and homes — where they belong, and we do not.

### American will

In his book “From Vietnam to 9/11,” Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.) wrote:

“I believe the most important lesson of the 20th century for America is that we can expect our national security to be challenged when our military is weak or when we are perceived as being irresolute.”

I agree completely. Having served in the U.S. Army on active and reserve duty for more than 37 years, there is no doubt in my mind that we have today the best military we have ever had. They are well-educated, well-trained, and highly motivated. Best of all, they are all volunteers, in most cases doing what they have chosen to do.

But the issue of being “irresolute” is troublesome.

Soldiers in Iraq expressed frustration that the U.S. media often ignores the positive work they are doing, and focuses on the negative. This negativity has spread into some of the partisan debate on the war.

The administration plan for success in the security of Iraq rests on “six core assumptions,” one of which is that “our own political will is steadfast.”

As a Vietnam veteran I continue



Rep. Rob Simmons with Craig Young of Plainfield in Iraq.

to be haunted by the specter that one of our failures in that war was a failure of will. It was a failure that began at home and spread abroad, bringing hope and comfort for those who wished us ill. Those who do not want to see freedom or any democratic institutions in Iraq or elsewhere in the Middle East are betting that we are “irresolute” and will tire of the effort.

All Americans want our troops home safely, successfully, and soon. But no war was won with an exit strategy. We need a timeline, not a deadline. We must systematically measure progress to ensure the Iraqis are assuming responsibility for security of their country. I believe we can and will begin withdrawing troops this year.

I have seen the faces of our men and women serving in Iraq. I do not doubt they want to come home as soon as possible. I felt the same way when I was in Vietnam. But they know they are doing essential work in the cause of freedom and democracy. The future of these values in the Middle East depends upon their success.

Their success, in turn, largely depends upon the will of the American people. The best way to thank our soldiers and their families for their service and sacrifice is to help them successfully complete the mission.

The writer is the U.S. House of Representatives member from the 2nd Congressional District.